
The Continental Congress was fortunate in 1781 when it selected Philadelphia's leading merchant, Robert Morris, to serve as superintendent of finance. Morris brought some order into the chaos of national government, and he managed to keep the United States solvent in the critical years immediately following the Revolution. Moreover, he was a man of vision who recognized the nation's potential greatness — greatness that he knew could never be attained by a government helplessly dependent on the sufferance of thirteen superior state governments. Always the dedicated nationalist, Morris worked effectively to increase the powers of Congress and to enhance public support for a strong nation.

Few leaders in the Revolutionary era made as significant a contribution to the future course of the United States as Morris, and a first-rate collection of his papers to aid both scholars and students is long overdue. Fortunately that void is now being filled. This is the fifth volume to appear since 1973 in what stands to be the definitive collection of Morris's papers for the crucial period from 1781 to 1784 when he directed the Office of Finance. Editors E. James Ferguson and John Catanzariti have done a superb job of collecting and meticulously editing Morris's diary, correspondence, and related materials. It is a monumental task that will take several more years and many volumes to complete. The present volume, covering only the three-month period from April 16 to July 20, 1782, should be viewed as part of the larger series, a series that is fundamental to the holdings of any university or major public library.

Morris's diary, a personal daily record of transactions in the Office of Finance, provides the organizational base for the collection. After each day's diary entry are letters and papers that the editors consider to be of more than routine importance, with letters sent from the Office of Finance preceding those received. Next come the documents of that day that the editors find to be of a more routine nature. These are presented in reduced type in an abbreviated format. This arrangement appears to work satisfactorily. Although the series is restricted to Morris's official papers, the editors occasionally reproduce selections from his private and business correspondence which throw light on his administration. Ferguson and Catanzariti provide
extensive footnotes that include numerous references to both primary and secondary sources on appropriate topics. In short, they have done a highly professional job of editing the papers of this important national founder.

By the spring of 1782, Morris had established himself as the leader of the Continental Congress; no other person so dominated its policies. He personally directed the national bureaucracy and struggled to build a solvent administration amid the shambles of Continental finance. His major objective was to sustain national unity by restoring public confidence in the financial integrity of the central government. The first step was to fund the Revolutionary debt, and in February 1782 commissioners were appointed to review claims of individuals and to issue government securities to settle them. Soon the commissioners also took responsibility for settling the accounts of the states. Morris also established the Bank of North America, a vehicle to provide an acceptable currency to substitute for the worthless Continental currency. The bank attracted private funds and credit, which Morris exploited to the advantage of the national government. The "Morris notes" were similarly important in bolstering faith in the public credit through the use of private credit.

While Morris's administrative record emerges clearly from the documents in this well-edited collection, the personality of the man remains pretty much a mystery. There is an extensive commercial correspondence, but very few personal letters or statements to give insight into the financier's character. Readers will likely achieve new insight, however, regarding Morris as a statesman who consciously pursued a course of action that eventually resulted in the Constitution and a strong United States.

Robert C. Detweiler


Despite the important contributions he made to the progress of